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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a view of the principalship as it is subjectively perceived by the principal. The role is constrained by a number of factors. One of these is the principal's private office that both signifies and produces the principal's unique status and position. One of the principal's primary obligations is to maintain the social structure within and outside the school. Principals' obligations involve situation-defining or defining the school structure, but the definitions are not of their own making. Recent changes in managerial styles create new demands on the principal, including a greater demand for measurable indicators of efficiency and effectiveness. The principal is also constrained by the way time is measured within the bureaucracy and by its strict use as an organizing feature of school life. As a consequence of these constraints, the principal may easily acquire a sense of being a victim of circumstance rather than the creator of occasions. It may be that the principal is the human agency through which the organization defines itself. (Author/JM)

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The School Administrator's World of Predetermined Meaning

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Some of the salient themes, typifications and interpretive procedures by which school administrators, pimarily principals, make sense of their work experience will be explored in this article. The literature of educational administration is disappointingly light in this area. The relatively voluminous literature of "in basket" exercises tends to assume an organization perspective rather than ask what this perspective is and how it is maintained.

Thomas Luckmann in calling attention to this deficiency in a wider context suggests that further information is needed on:

> ...the subjective acquisition and grasp of taxonomies and interpretive schemes, of social categories of space, time and causality, of typical motivational relations and structures of relevance, of behavioural recipes and value hierarchies, of what is taken for granted and what is considered to be problematic in a given society. [1]

Luckmann contends that language plays an important role in these processes, yet there appear to be formidable methodological problems in providing even speculative answers to the questions that could be asked using Luckmann's sociology of language approach.

Harry Wolcott offers an alternative approach in his *The Man in the Principal's Office*.[2] Using the naturalistic reporting technique of the ethnographer, Wolcott describes the life, habits, problems and something of the interpretive procedures of a typical elementary school principal in the United States.

Wolcott's account reveals many interesting facets of this principal's habitual ways of interpreting familiar objects, persons and events encountered in everyday life of the school. Wolcott confirms Sarason's earlier comment that

> the principal's actual knowledge of the characteristics of the system is frequently incomplete and faulty to the degree that his conception of picture of what the system will permit or tolerate leads him to a passive rather than an active role.[3]

Wolcott also records that teachers were unable to describe the characteristics of an effective principal in anything but negative terms - that is by the things he does *not* do rather than by the things he * does.

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* I shall refer to school administrators using the masculine pronoun because school bureaucracies are traditionally sexist.

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This negative concept of the principal ties in with my previous contention that bureaucrats do not always act as conscious agents in the world but rather as a physical locus wherein decisions are made according to recipes legitimized by organizational procedures. Wolcott comments:

> ...administrators feel compelled (and in fact are compelled) to present a facade of having pursued a totally rational course in their evaluation procedures when their true rationality haunts them with the knowledge that human judgments about other humans are never made on purely analytical bases [4]

He also comments on the bureaucratized principle of justice:

> ...I was struck with how often a principal is called up to settle questions concerning personal property, or personal rights, and how seldom his pronouncements take into account the total context of the problem or the typically anthithetical roles the principal plays as detective, prosecutor, witness, judge, warden and parole officer...a careful analysis of school life might reveal that the administration of school justice+ is typically mishandled by everyone.[5]

Finally, Wolcott draws attention to the values which principals endeavour to maintain - "trusty, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent." Although Waller[6] called schools "museums of virtue," Wolcott's account suggests that the museum's artifacts are alive and well, being embodied in the daily activities of the principal.

According to Wolcott's portrait, this typical elementary school principal emerges as a person who is largely unaware of the social context in which he operates;* presents an image of himself determined more by what he does not do than what he does; feels compelled to act "rationally" in his official capacity without enquiring into the nature of this rationality; and, finally, appears to be a personification of middle class virtues but seems unwilling to probe the deeper meaning of important values such as "justice."

This portrait is consistent with that of a conscientious administrator. The administrator, whether he be located in a school, corporation or government office, acts "Rationally" to bring about organizationally-approved goals by organizationally-approved means according to the principles of (bureaucratic) justice and efficiency. He is not a person who opens up new possibilities for the expression of the human spirit; he is, rather a person who confirms existing ideals and values, by activities which express the major value orientation of the organization. By acting within this framework the bureaucrat attains power - but not to exert his own will.

Wolcott's study indicates that the sense of agency in a principal's working life is restricted to maintaining existing patterns. We still need to know what processes are involved in maintaining an organizational structure in which the position of principal is thought significant.

A useful start could be made by asking: why do the members of school bureaucracies see the office of the principal as real?

The Reality of the Office of the Principal

Modern consciousness habitually explains the objects and events of experience by positing some phenomena as concrete objective realities and others as ideas or concepts; we usually have little difficulty in distinguishing between a physical office and a functional office or role.

The common sense explanation for the existence of a physical office usually refers to functional needs - the principal needs an office so that he can conduct private interviews or complete essential administrative tasks without frequent and unnecessary interruptions. Such explanations imply that the physical office exists in order to facilitate performance of the official role. A more reflective explanation suggests that the reverse may be the case. That is, the principal's functional activities may be a consequence of his having the private office with its ancillary equipment and clerical staff. Pursuing this point further, if every teacher in a school had a private office and secretary then many of the tasks typically performed by the principal could, and almost certainly would, be undertaken by other teachers.

If we place the question of the functional necessity (in the usual sense) of the principal's office into abeyance, we can further ask if there are other latent functions served by its inevitable pre-

+Wolcott does not problematize the concept of bureaucratized justice; rather, he is calling attention to some inconsistencies and possible contradictions in the practice of ordinary, that is, institutionalized justice, applied to schools.

*The principal is not "culturally literate" in the sense that C. A. Bowers uses the phrase.

sence in bureaucratized schools. The principal's office is also a symbolic expression of an otherwise invisible social hierarchy in which the principal is located at or near the top. The office, rather than the person, provides concrete expression of a predetermined and enduring social structure that every person within the bureaucracy must acknowledge.

The apparent distinction between the physical office and the functional office is somewhat blurred when described in these terms. The room and its furnishing, by their existence, serve to remind people that there is a bureaucratic hierarchy. Viewed this way, the principal's office serves a similar function to a monarch's crown or a sheriff's badge; without the symbols, the official is unable to perform all his functions.

The meaning of the principal's role in the school is thus centered around his occupancy of the office; his authority is derived from the occupancy of that office rather than from the authority of superior knowledge or even indispensable function. Principals are indispensable only in a formal hierarchic organization.

The principals themselves do not typically interpret the meaning of their office in that way. In an informal survey, some principals were asked, "What does it mean, being principal of your school?" Some of the replies were interesting:

> It means that I've got to work harder than anyone else around here. [High school principal in country town.]
>
> I guess it means that I'm the meat in the sandwich. The superintendent kicks down, and the teachers - who are pretty militant here - kick up. I get the flak from all directions. [High school principal, large city.]
>
> Being principal here means that I am on my way up. I have to prove myself as an administrator in a small school like this before I can be considered for any of the top jobs. [Elementary school principal, small town.]
>
> I don't see what you're getting at with that sort of question. If you're asking how I got to be principal, I'll tell you. Those know-it-all's in the county office just gave up trying to stop me. I was the obvious person for the job; I had been teaching in this county longer than anyone who counts. [Elementary school principal, small town.]

These are unguarded comments by principals to one of their peers. All of them could, if the occasion required, deliver a splendid homily on the importance of the administrator as an educational leader. The more inspiring rhetoric of education is usually reserved for public ceremonies and not always taken seriously by the principal.

In personal conversations with many principals, few described the central meaning of their official roles in terms of the education of children, or the occupancy of the office. Although some spoke of the social, psychological and other "problems" of children, few spoke of enlightenment, understanding, or spiritual growth. The most frequent interpretation of a principal's role, from these principals' point of view, was that of a facilitator of organizational activity.*

Hierarchy and Status in the Administrator's World

The incumbent, or aspiring incumbent, of any administrative office must maintain social reality that includes an hierarchy of social relationships in which the principal's office is actual and meaningful. A principal may privately believe that status differences, prestige, esteem and higher incomes are illusory, sordid or materialistic, he must nonetheless act publicly as if they were real, meaningful and socially valuable.

This separation of the subjectively understood self from organizationally defined role performance, creates tensions within the person that have consequences for the organization and the processes of education. These tensions are resolved in various ways; some administrators take refuge in formally correct relationships with working colleagues; some isolate themselves behind barricades of secretaries, desk and office partitions; others devote their energies to the compilation of records and reports; and some manage to overcome the tensions and develop warm personal relationships with the staff and students.

Although some principals manage to reconcile the functional imperatives of their organizational role with their expressive need to interact with other humans on a person-to-person basis, the hierarchic organization pressures him towards emphasizing the organizational role.

What the principal perceives as real and important has a significant influence over how he acts; in turn, his actions have an important influence over how others perceive and define the reality of their experiences within the school. This influence does not create a symmetry; in other words, what a principal perceives as an important problem may not be

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*Again a sharp contrast needs to be drawn between what the principal says in his official capacity and in informal conversation. There is no hypocrisy here - the overall goals of education are not usually perceived as organizing principles for day-to-day activity.

perceived as a problem by others; nonetheless, if a particular problem consumes the interest and energy of a principal for an extended period of time, it eventually becomes a problem for everyone around him.

Although principals very in the situations they define as problematic, there are recurrent themes in their taken-for-granted knowledge that arise from their social location in bureaucratic organizations. As described earlier, the principal must minimally believe in the reality of a hierarchy of social relationships, esteem and authority. This hierarchy is also linked to the notion of personal advancement or career, and a career is only possible within the context of a relatively stable social structure.

School Administrators and the New Forms of Control

In any formal organization the middle-level bureaucrats are usually accountable to superiors who also select, transfer and promote incumbents to and from office. Principals are usually appointed in the belief that the ways in which their reality is organized is compatible with that of their superiors; consequently, principals rarely act in surprising or unpredictable ways. In other words, an important element in the new forms of control is the selective placement of individuals in strategic locations. This ensures that autonomy is extended only to those individuals who exercise that autonomy in organizationally-approved ways.

In school systems dominated by the industrial-bureaucratic mode of consciousness, administrators are held accountable for the efficient and effective management of their schools. The meaning of "efficient" and "effective" is usually reduced to observable and measurable quantities that may have little to do with the quality of education. Where this ideology is highly developed, the quality of education will be defined in terms of attainment according to measurable indicators of administrative success.

These indicators may be roughly categorized into two groups - the budgetary and the educational. An "efficient" school principal is usually expected to produce budgetary records demonstrating that the cost per pupil within his school does not exceed the average of other schools similarly located. According to bureaucratic logic, all schools in similar categories ought to cost similar amounts to run. In practice this means that two schools of similar size in similar neighborhoods will be funded at roughly the same levels, thus their curricula will be designed at similar levels of cost. Put another way, "efficient" principals must manage school financial affairs within predetermined budgetary levels.

The more recent introduction of "educational" control mechanisms required the principal to play new games under new sets of rules. Some of the new mechanisms can be likened to quality control mechanisms in factories. Under this system, a sample of outputs is measured and compared against other samples from similar factories or against the original specifications; the former method is purely comparative and the latter, criterial.

Both comparative and criterion-based quality control mechanisms have been introduced to schools. Principals may be required to demonstrate their capacity for innovation and educational leadership by introducing them as an operational reality. As principals are selected and appointed on the basis of their presumed willingness to act rationally and purposively toward predetermined goals, the introduction of such quality control mechanisms is not likely to be opposed by the career-oriented administrator.

The most widely used quality-control mechanism in American schools requires specifying educational outcomes in behavioural terms. This appears to be a direct borrowing from the management by objectives procedures in business. According to one source, the goal of management by objectives is "to integrate the functions of planning, communication, coordination, participation, goal setting, control and performance on a day-to-day basis by relating all of these to objectives. These objectives assure organization output as *defined* and not merely as an attempt to meet individual and organizational needs."[8]

Defined this way, management by objectives is a technique for containing freedom of individual actions within organizationally-determined limits. Under this regime, all significant acts must be goal-directed, and the goals must be established in advance by reference to the needs of the same or other organizations within the total system.

In this extract the final sentence suggesting that objectives should *not* be established in reference to organizational needs is misleading - the authors mean that organizational needs other than the schools should be met. Presumably, these are business organizations and public bureaucracies.

The same document indicates the ways in which the new forms of control introduce new realities into the lives of principals and hence others within

the school:

> A fourth more pressing reason for writing objectives is clearly-defined, observable terms is because this school system is moving toward an evaluation plan for administrators that uses measurable objectives as the new primary component in judgement regarding the administrators contribution to the system.[9]

The new realities transform our traditional understanding of education. A later paragraph makes this clear:

> The verb is the key word in the objective. If it describes a concrete observable behaviour like "count," "sort," then you are on your way to a measurable performance. However, if the verb is more abstract, like "knows," "understands," "appreciates," then you will probably never come to earth and continue to write one goal statement after another. Goals are general, abstract; objectives are specific, concrete, observable.[10]

School administrators are thus being advised to implement educational programs in a language where terms like "know," "understand," and "appreciate" are discouraged. A teacher avoiding these terms would have been thought strange in the days before the organizational patterns of industrial bureaucracies were introduced to schools. Additionally, the authors of this particular document misunderstand the common usages of "abstract;" knowing can be a perfectly concrete experience. The probable source of the authors' dissatisfaction with the terms is that it does not fit into the positivist way of perceiving reality, hence the term is seen as ambiguous.

The act of knowing possesses two distinct modes - "knowing how" and "knowing that" - knowing how to play a piano is vastly different from knowing that playing a piano involves striking the keys in sequence. Management by objectives tends to reduce all knowledge to "knowing how." The connection between the short-term objectives and the overall goals of education are not usually discussed in this literature; hence, some highly questionable assumptions tend to pass without critical scrutiny. One typical assumption is that developing a student's competence in, say, long division will assist the student develop an interest in mathematical activities.

Furthermore, by looking at only the behavioural aspects of learning, the management by objectives ideology tends to overlook some important aspects of the educational process. As sentiment and feeling are not observable behaviours they tend to be thought of as less important; but it is a strange view of education to suggest that internal states are not of paramount concern.

The bureaucratization of many school systems was accomplished in a relatively short period (less than one hundred years) and with curiously little protest. In asking for reasons, one plausible explanation could be that the bureaucratic structuring of common concepts such as time and space have been internalized into the consciousness of many middle-level administrators making them quite vulnerable to the logic of bureaucratic reasoning.

Time and the Social World of Bureaucracy

The concept of time occupies a central position in the interpretation of all social experiences. Unless consciousness includes a sense of passing time or duration there can be no sense of sequence nor yet of causation. Additionally, the location of events in a time continuum creates the possibility of explaining memories in a way that does not depend upon fantasy or illusion. When we recollect events we do not say that we are imagining that such and such happened, we say that our present mental images are traces of actual events in an actual past. The concept of time is so fundamental to our everyday interpretation of experience that it is almost impossible to imagine a form of human consciousness without it.

Despite our rational efforts to measure time by the use of calendars, clocks and the counting of horses' teeth, the subjective experience of passing time is unrelated to its mechanical metering. As Albert Einstein laconically expressed it, time is a relative concept.

Within bureaucratic structures, time is an absolute; the hours, minutes or days are treated as unchanging intervals over which man has no control. As Lewis Mumford so aptly describes it, the symbol of modern civilization is the clock. The bureaucratization of time requires us to think of events, including our personal lives, as extending through a sequence of equally-spaced intervals - years, days, hours or seconds. Although we are aware that our subjective experience of time is quite variable, we use idiomatic expressions such as "It seemed as if I was waiting for hours and hours but it was *really* only a few minutes," suggesting that the "reality" is not the experience but rather the organizationally useful measurement. The bureaucratic treatment of time leaves little to human imagination; a bureaucrat has his date of entry into the bureaucracy noted and his "career trajectory" recorded against calendar

months. His cessation of work by retirement is not determined by incapacity or unwillingness to work but rather by the passage of an arbitrary number of years.

Not only does the passage of years become a central theme in a bureaucrat's career, so also does the yearly, monthly, weekly and even daily schedule of events. In the bureaucrat's world, activities do not occur because "I was in the spirit," but rather because a plan, schedule or timetable requires them to happen.

By scheduling events to occur at specified times, the bureaucratized school also specified what feelings, emotions and sentiments are appropriate at those times. Time, as measured by some impersonal mechanism, thus becomes the arbiter of more than our activities; the bureaucratic concept of time is forced into our consciousness as the *real* time, the only possible time, a time that is immutable, refractory and demanding.

For the administrator, time finds its meaning and reality in terms of its scarcity - there is never enough time to complete the schedule; there are always more possible activities than time will allow. This urgent summons which time imposes upon consciousness is linked with our projection of present intentions into a future. The bureaucratic concept of planned time schedules derives its sense from the human intent of attaining specified goals within specified time limits and can be seen as directly related to purposive rationality. "good" planning requires the time scale for any activity to be sufficient and no more - a bureaucracy with many people sitting around with "time on their hands" is reckoned inefficient. Hence bureaucratic activities are usually planned to minimize the time available for any given task even if it does not always happen that way.

More frequently and somewhat perversely, the number of tasks or the time taken to do them expands or contracts to fill the time available. Although the bureaucrat is often genuinely busy, his activities tend to be regulated by somewhat arbitrary time allocations, rather than the other way around.

The peculiarly bureaucratic transformation of time transforms its subjective meaning so that the bureaucrat rarely recognizes that the urgency and the sense of scarcity of time are socially constructed.

This phenomena could be explained in terms of the emergence of bureaucratic consciousness. Time spans linked to the life of a monarch, or even president, brings it back to a human experience; but measured in terms of a repeated celestial event, objectified time assumes complete separation from the individual.

The measurement of time in units geared to the movements of the earth and sun emphasizes man's subjugation to the imperatives of a system of ordered parts. This subjugation of subjective states is but one of the characteristic features of the consciousness of "the man in the principal's office." Every action undertaken, every decision made, is located somewhere in a time scale of which the incumbent is constantly aware. The socially constructed concept of time existing as a reification in the administrators consciousness becomes a major influence upon decisions that administrators make.

Summary

In this paper I have argued that the meaning of the principal's office is subjectively interpreted by the incumbent. This interpretation is constrained by a number of factors; one of the most important of these is the existence of a material and actual principal's office. This room is a symbolic reminder of the social structure of the school; its occupancy places the principal in a unique situation within the school.

The incumbent of office usually recognizes that his special position within the school confers upon him duties and obligations as well as, sometimes, privileges and rights. Whether the principal recognizes it or not, one of his primary obligations is to maintain the social structure or network within and outside the school so that *inter alia* the principal's social standing is recognized.

The principal is not the originator of the social network with which he is involved; he is usually absorbed in a "chain of command" in which he is held accountable to some higher authority. Consequently, his obligations involve situation-defining, but not defined according to his preferences. Recent changes in managerial styles have introduced new forms of control which in some ways increase the principal's degree of antonomy but in other ways impose greater restrictions. These new forms of control create new realities which must be interpreted. Part of these realities is a greater demand for measurable indicators of efficiency and effectiveness.

These pressures also tend to impose constraints on the subjective meaning of time. Bureaucratic

time, being time as measured by clocks and calendars, becomes a central organizing feature around which the principal's daily life revolves. Many principals come to feel that time is an objective absolute entity that regulates the passage of events.

As a consequence of being located in a prestructured social network and pressed by a sense of urgency in which to accomplish required action, the principal may easily acquire a sense of being the victim of circumstance rather than the creator of occasions. Put another way, the principal easily becomes the location in space/time where certain decisions are made, but without the decisions being his.

The principal's freedom of action in situation-defining is limited by the necessity of his actions being constantly directed towards maintaining the organizational structure. Routine and perfunctory habits such as saying "good morning" upon arriving at work are the means by which principals re-affirm that the situation is as officially defined.

One plausible explanation of the principal's function is that he is the human agency through which the organization defines itself. Almost inevitably, the administrator is the embodiment of bureaucratic consciousness: how he comes to be like that is a topic for a further paper. □

Theory

Research

Practice

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